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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0584
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT PRIORITY 0226
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT PRIORITY 0224
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ALMATY PRIORITY 0146
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE PRIORITY
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK PRIORITY 0116
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1233
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000382

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SUBJECT: AWAMI LEAGUE INSIDER OFFERS HIS SOLUTION TO
CURRENT POLITICAL IMPASSE

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Political Secretary to jailed Awami League President Sheikh Hasina, believes there is still time for the military-backed Caretaker Government and major political parties to reach consensus on a way forward for the country. He said he felt Hasina was ready to negotiate her own future, but any overture would have to go through her family. He believes that if she is permitted to leave for medical treatment in the United States as requested she could be willing to step aside as Awami League president and assume a senior "advisory" position within the party. END SUMMARY.

"PERSONALITIES CAUSED THIS"

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12. (C) Recently, POLOFF and Acting Pakistan/Bangladesh Office Director Richard Sacks met with Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Awami League Political Secretary. Saber discussed the current state of affairs within the Awami League, as well as potential exit strategies for the caretaker government and its military backers who have promised a return to democracy with parliamentary elections by December 2008. "Personalities caused this coup," he said, referring to the declaration of a State of Emergency in January 2007. All problems, he acknowledged, stemmed from the intransigence of the leaders of the two main political parties, Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina and Bangladesh National Party Chairperson Khaleda Zia.

13. (C) Saber rued the mishandling of the two ladies, situation by the caretaker government and military. First, they failed to force the women into exile in the first half of 2007, and then they mishandled corruption charges against the two, tainting the credibility of the judicial processes against them and creating the appearance of political persecution. "A compromise is still possible," he said, but "now the ladies have the upper hand." It is hard to see an outcome at this point that does not involve cutting a deal, he continued. (NOTE: The caretaker government plans to begin a dialogue with the political parties in April, a possible precursor for cutting such a deal. END NOTE.)

EARLIER EFFORTS AT A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT

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14. (C) Saber described an earlier effort at a deal between Hasina and Brigadier General ATM Amin of the military intelligence agency, the Directorate General Forces Intelligence (DGFI). In June 2007, two months after the government relented and permitted Hasina back into the country from a trip to the U.S. to visit her family, Hasina attempted to leave the country for the United States again. Saber claims he acted as an intermediary between Hasina and Amin at the time, trying to negotiate a meeting in the U.S. between the two to reach some accommodation that would involve Hasina stepping aside in exchange for her freedom. At the last minute, the government refused to permit Hasina to leave; Saber said Amin decided that Hasina could not be trusted, and decided not to permit her to leave. Shortly thereafter, in July, Hasina was charged with corruption and arrested. (NOTE: At the time, Amin was actively promoting to us a new political party to support caretaker government activities, but never suggested to us a meeting with Hasina. Recently, however, Amin corroborated Saber's account of the aborted meeting. END NOTE.)

"PLUS TWO, MINUS 20"

15. (C) Although he has not met with her since her imprisonment Saber said he believes Hasina has been worn down by her eight-month incarceration -- the first prolonged time she has ever spent in jail -- and he felt she was "ready to make a deal." He outlined an agreement which he referred to as "Plus Two, Minus 20," an allusion to the ill-fated "Minus Two" deal of last year that would have exiled the two ladies. According to the proposal, the ladies would be permitted to remain in Bangladesh as long as they foreswore running for

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Parliament or serving again as prime minister. In exchange for their freedom, their parties would agree to accept the prosecutions of 20 or so leading political figures most tainted by corruption. This would include arrested Awami League Presidium members, as well as Khaleda Zia's two sons. (NOTE: Saber admitted this might be tough for Zia to swallow, but there could be room to negotiate their departure from the country "on medical grounds." END NOTE.)

"SEQUENCING"

16. (C) Rather than try to remove both ladies at once, Saber said he had recommended to senior military officials that they need to consider "sequencing" -- i.e., cutting a separate deal with Hasina first, and then once Zia sees Hasina has broken ranks, cut a deal with her. Saber said the only acceptable, and trusted, intermediaries for Hasina would be members of her family: for example, her sister Rehana, who lives in London and has been charged with corruption in absentia, or Hasina's son Sanjeeb (Joy), who is attending Harvard. Any negotiation would have to take place outside of Bangladesh. Saber alluded to an earlier (but unsuccessful) effort along these lines, between Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed and Joy, during Moeen's trip to the U.S. in the fall, but said "the time was not right."

17. (C) Saber said Hasina's request to travel to the U.S. for medical treatment was legitimate. She has periodically visited the U.S. for tests since an assassination attempt in August 2004 and her hearing has deteriorated since her arrest, causing vertigo. He said while there was a chance Hasina could use her freedom in the U.S. to agitate against the government, the chances were stronger she could be enticed into a deal that would keep her out of the country through the December 2008 elections and behind the scenes, perhaps as a "ceremonial" leader, afterward. Such a deal could be hammered out between Hasina and government or military intermediaries in the States while she is undergoing treatment there.

SABER'S OWN FUTURE

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18. (C) As for his own political ambitions, Saber coyly suggested his options remained open. He acknowledged he was considering running for Dhaka mayor, which under the new election regulations would preclude him from also running for Parliament. He suggested Dhaka would be a strong base for his future political career. (NOTE: Though Saber remains close to Hasina, his open channels with the military have led to a whispering campaign among Hasina loyalists that he is trying to maneuver her aside. END NOTE.)

COMMENT: VIABLE EXIT STRATEGY, OR MORE POSTURING?

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19. (C) Saber remains one of the more thoughtful and better connected politicians in the country, and has been unaffected by the ongoing anti-corruption campaign. He has a`Q managed t9`QT-{-VsQQQaid, his suggestions overlook a few significant snags. For one, the government and military are hesitating to permit Hasina to leave for medical treatment out of concern that the minute she arrives in the States, she will launch a public affairs campaign to bring down the government. Even if Hasina were willing to cut a deal, it is uncertain whether Zia would. Though Khaleda's son Koko is said to be eager to leave the country, his brother Tarique, who has been in jail for over a year but has had no charges against him yet, is said to be refusing to leave the country. Lastly, Saber is not an objective party: he represents the younger generation of Awami League politicians who have been blocked from more senior positions by a dynastically inclined Hasina and an increasingly aged Presidium. Removing these obstacles could pave the way for his ascendancy to the leadership of the party, which might in part explain his willingness to play this "mediating" role.

Pasi